

•ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH, St. Louis, Illinois, Tuesday, June 17, 2003•

## Flood control project gets final OK

By HANNAH BERGMAN

The Missouri Department of Natural Resources removed the last hurdle last week to one of the Army Corps of Engineers' most controversial flood control projects.

The department has granted the corps the last certification needed for a Mississippi River flood control project in the St. John's Bayou-New Madrid Floodway area.

The \$85 million project to close a 1,500-foot hole in the levee has met with heated debate from national environmental groups since 1999. The Department of Natural Resources refused to approve the project in November because of disputes about the project's impact on wetlands.

But approval came last week after the corps made allowances for monitoring the environmental impact at the site and changes to protect Big Oak Tree State Park, a part of the 132,000-acre New Madrid Floodway.

U.S. Rep. Jo Ann Emerson called the solution a "workable compromise." She has supported the project and said the common-sense solution would benefit the environment and people.

But the department is still concerned that restoring 8,500 acres - mitigation the corps has agreed to provide - won't be enough.

That's why state officials required the corps to monitor the project for five years and fix any problems, said Scott Totten of the department.

The other change requires the corps to build a levee around the state park and a pipe that will allow Mississippi River water to drain into the area. The concerns about the park were one reason the original plan was rejected, Totten said.

But environmental groups aren't happy. The Missouri Coalition for the Environment was part of the group challenging the corps' appeal for certification.

"We were very disappointed in the settlement itself," said Ted Heisel, the law and policy coordinator for the group, which has concerns about the usefulness of gates in the levee for fish to pass through during flood season. It also doesn't believe that the corps is restoring enough land.

The corps did not return calls.

Environmentalists also believe that the project, designed to help the town of East Prairie, Mo., won't improve the town's economic or flood problems, said Tim Searchinger of the national group Environmental Defense.

The corps' appeal, which was pending before the Missouri Clean Water Commission, an administrative group that hears such cases, may be dismissed this week.

If so, Searchinger said, he will file a new appeal to stop the project.

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